

## **Using Contextual Clues to Infer Word Meaning: an Evaluation of Current Exercise Types**

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There is a close link between the learner's reading ability and vocabulary: reading expands vocabulary, and this expansion improves reading ability. The skill of inferring meaning from context is a catalyst in this dynamic relationship. It is widely assumed that this skill does not transfer automatically from first- to foreign-language reading; most reading coursebooks therefore include exercises which aim to develop the skill. This article classifies and evaluates the exercises with this objective in a selection of five coursebooks published during the last ten years. The majority of the exercise types are found deficient in that they offer the learner: (a) little help in developing the skill, and (b) a partial understanding of word meaning. This need not be the case, as there already exists the basis for a more thorough and balanced approach.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Recent years have seen the re-emergence of vocabulary as a vital component of the foreign language learning curriculum. Its reappearance has coincided with a similar reinstatement of reading skills. However fortuitous it may have been, this coincidence should be seen as a happy one, given the substantial evidence linking competence in reading and knowledge of vocabulary. Yorio (1971), for example, in a survey of learners' own views of their reading problems, found that vocabulary was seen as the greatest obstacle. More recently, Nation and Coady (1988) offer several studies as evidence for their conclusion that "... vocabulary knowledge would seem to be the most clearly identifiable subcomponent of the ability to read..." (p. 98).

The link between vocabulary and reading skills, however, does not apply in only one direction. Vocabulary expansion can doubtless lead to an improvement in reading comprehension. But there is also strong evidence to suggest that reading is an important means by which new words are understood and learned. Nation and Coady (op. cit.), for example, suggest that the learner can "... guess between 60 per cent and 80 per cent of the unknown words in a text if the density of unknown words is not too high..." (p. 104). It has also been suggested (by, for example, Honefield, 1977; Xiaolong, 1988) that the active thinking process of inferring lexical meaning leads not only to the comprehension of new words in context, but also to their integration into the learners' vocabulary. There emerges a picture of a powerful, cyclical relationship: reading leads to vocabulary expansion, which results in greater reading competence, which improves reading performance and stimulates further vocabulary expansion.

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Given the apparent power of the skill of using contextual clues to infer the meaning of unknown words, it is clearly in the interests of the learner to acquire the skill and employ it efficiently in reading. What is less clear is how this can be best achieved. We do not yet have enough evidence to be able to answer the question of whether or not the skill transfers automatically from first- to foreign-language reading. Twaddell (1972) argues that the skill does not transfer. This view would probably be substantiated intuitively by many teachers who have seen their learners reach for a dictionary to look up a word whose meaning could apparently be recovered with ease through available contextual clues. Several writers on reading in a foreign language (for example: Grellet, 1981; Nuttall, 1982) implicitly accept the same view by providing examples of exercises designed to develop the skill. Although no definitive answer can yet be given to the question of whether the skill transfers or not, we can speculate that teaching may aid transfer and/or make the use of the skill more effective.

To summarise, it appears that: (a) lexical knowledge is an important component of reading ability; (b) the skill of using context to discover the meaning of unknown words is an effective aid to successful reading; (c) the process of discovering meaning aids vocabulary learning; (d) teaching may aid the acquisition and effective use of the skill.

Exercises which aim to teach the skill under discussion can be found in a large number of published reading materials. These exercises are perhaps too readily assumed to achieve their aim. This assumption is questioned in the following classification and evaluation of the exercises used in five coursebooks.

## CLASSIFICATION OF EXERCISES

A selection of published reading materials is examined below with a view to abstracting the exercise types which aim to teach the skill of discovering word meaning in context. The materials consist of four reading coursebooks: *Skills for Learning: Foundation* (henceforward abbreviated to SLF) (University of Malaya Language Centre, 1980); *Skills for Reading* (abbreviated to SR) (Morrow, 1980); *Advanced Reading Skills* (abbreviated to ARS) (Barr, Clegg and Wallace, 1981); *Effective Reading* (abbreviated to ER) (Greenall and Swan, 1986); and one vocabulary development coursebook: *Vocabulary Development* (abbreviated to VODE) (Sim and Laufer-Dvorkin, 1984).

Three of the above books present the exercises under explicit headings: SLF uses *Learning to accept unfamiliar words* and *Using contextual clues*; SR has the heading *Word recognition by synonym*; and ER uses *Dealing with unfamiliar words*. ARS explains the purpose of the exercises in a boxed note, while VODE leaves the learner free to make his/her own assumptions about the exercises.

The five coursebooks present a total of twenty-two different exercise formats. These can be reduced in number to sixteen by ignoring the following two minor differences: variation of one in the number of multiple-choice distractors offered; length of text in a cloze exercise. These sixteen formats are described below. For reasons of space, examples are given only of those which may not be clear from the description. Each example is taken from one of the five books in which it is used; if the same format is used in one or more of the other books, a reference to an example is given. Similarly, if a format is not exemplified below, reference is made to an example or examples in the books in which the format is used.

- (1) The learner is required to choose the correct meaning of a nonsense word from four or five possibilities; the choice is based on four or five short texts containing the word.  
(SLF, p.42-3)
- (2) The learner has to choose, from three or four words, the synonym of an italicised word in a text; the list of three or four words is inserted into the text at the end of the sentence containing the italicised word.  
(SLF, p.113; ARS, p.10-13)
- (3) The learner is asked to choose, from three or four words, the synonym of an italicised word which appears in a single sentence; the word has already been seen in a text read in an earlier part of the lesson.  
(SR, p.38; VODE, p.12)
- (4) The learner is required to choose, from two, three or four words, the synonym of a word encountered in a text which has just been read; these multiple-choice exercises are placed at the end of the text.  
(ARS, p.14-16; ER, p.8)
- (5) The learner has to match a list of words, taken from a text which has been read, to a list of synonyms; the exercise follows the reading of the text. The list of synonyms may include a number of superfluous words, as in ER, thus adding a multiple-choice element; or not, as in VODE.  
(ER, p.10-12; VODE, p.4-5)
- (6) The learner has to find and classify words in a text which has been read under given superordinate terms.

Example:

(The text preceding this exercise takes the reader on a guided tour of an English castle. The learner's task is to find other words in the text, like *oak* and *staircase*, to classify under the two headings.)

plants/types of trees:	oak
architectural features:	staircase

(ER, p.40-42)

- (7) The learner is required to classify words in a text which has been read according to whether they have a positive or negative connotation.

Example:

(The text preceding this exercise consists of twelve paragraphs; the first two words in the exercise come from the second paragraph, which appears below.)

Homo Faber, Man the Builder, has tragically always seen the jungle as something alien, an environment to be vanquished, replaced with his own constructions. In the past twenty years the rate of pillage has increased alarmingly and huge tracts of verdant, beautiful forest – an irreplaceable treasure house of living things – has given way, often to wasteland. The evidence is that Man will redouble his destructive efforts until the forest 'system' is smashed, and the jungle will function no more.

(The learner is asked to put a '+' or a '-' next to each of the words below, according to whether the sense is positive or negative.)

- a alien
- b pillage

(ER, p.88-90)

- (8) After reading a text, the learner sees a list of words, which have to be matched in meaning to words used in the text.

Example:

(The first four lines of the text, which is over forty lines long, are given here, sufficient for the first word to be matched.)

Some people have drawn the conclusion from Bowlby's work that children should not be subjected to day care before the age of three because of the parental separation it entails, and many people do believe this.

- a involves

(ER, p.155-156)

- (9) A word encountered in a text at the beginning of a lesson appears later, with the same sense, in a single sentence. The same word then appears in three further sentences, each time with a different sense of the word. The learner is required to choose the one of the three sentences in which the word has the same sense as in the single sentence and the text.

Example:

- 1 One of the differences between man and animal *lies* in the possession of language.
- a Johnny often *lies* to his older brother.
- b After lunch many people *lie* down for a rest.
- c Beauty *lies* in the eye of the beholder.

(VODE, p.6)

- (10) A text with one or more blank spaces at irregular intervals is read by the learner, who has to complete the spaces with a suitable word. The blank spaces may all stand for the same missing word, as in SLF, or for different words, as in ARS.

(SLF, p.41; ARS, p.8-10)

- (11) A text is first read by the learner. Sentences taken from the text follow it, with blank spaces replacing certain words. The learner's task is to supply a suitable word, and then look back at the original text to compare his/her choice with the word in the text, using a dictionary if desired to check the meaning.

(ER, p.82)

- (12) A list of words is shown to the learner before s/he reads a text in which the same words appear. The learner is asked whether s/he knows or can work out (e.g. from prefixes) any of the meanings of the words. The learner then reads the text and supplies the meanings s/he has discovered for these words while reading. In the case of the example from ARS, the three 'unknown' words are contextualised in single sentences; the words are then encountered again in a longer text.

Example:

(Below are the first three 'unknown' words and the three short texts which are intended to clarify their meaning.)

subservient  
impediment  
cohabitation

- a Women, long considered the inferior sex, are therefore expected to be subservient to men.

- b Intolerance can be a serious impediment to a successful marriage.
- c Any relationship which involves cohabitation presents problems which are avoided if one lives alone.

(There follows the longer text in which the words appear again.)

(ARS, p.21-2)

- (13) After reading a text, the learner sees a number of 'unknown' words taken from the text, together with words in the same collocational chain. The learner has to deduce the meanings of the 'unknown' words.

Example:

- |   |                                     |  |
|---|-------------------------------------|--|
| a | <i>matriarch</i> of the <i>clan</i> | Mme Saidi ... 72-year-old ...<br>... the Saidi family ...                          |
| b | <i>customary</i> Friday lunch:      | ... the Friday gathering ...<br>... the natural time for family<br>socialising ... |

(ER, p.28)

- (14) The learner first reads a text. S/he then sees two words from a collocational chain in the text, and has to choose a further word which appeared in the same collocational chain from a list of three words.

Example:

- |   |                         |                            |
|---|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| a | new, technology         | arranged/developed/built   |
| b | example, problems       | undergo/suffer/face        |
| c | specify, precise        | ways/means/terms           |
| d | this, reason            | principal/major/big        |
| e | probing ahead, practice | frequent/successful/common |

(SR, p.64)

- (15) The learner reads a text, is then shown certain words from the same text again, and is required to decide on the part of speech of these words by referring back to the text.

Example:

(Below is one of the paragraphs of the text, the subject of which is how doodles are an aid to psychological self-analysis. A doodle accompanies each paragraph, but the doodles and paragraphs are jumbled; the learner has to match them before doing the exercise. Two words are taken from the paragraph below for the exercise; the learner is asked to decide whether the words are nouns, verbs or adjectives.)

Knives, daggers, guns, or thin and angular strokes show aggressive behaviour patterns and sometimes even sadistic tendencies. Such things as whips and instruments of torture can reveal inherent masochistic tendencies.

- a angular
- b inherent

(ER, p.7-8)

- (16) After reading a text, the learner is asked to look back to find (a) the explanations for or definitions of certain words, and (b) the typographical devices used to signal the explanations.

Example:

(The twelve-paragraph text used is the same one as in exercise format (7) above. The first two paragraphs are the one given below and the one in format (7); the first two phrases in the exercise come from these paragraphs.)

The so-called Jungle of popular imagination, the tropical rain forest belt stretching around our planet at the Equator, has taken some 60 million years to evolve to its present state. It is, quite simply, the most complex, most important ecosystem on earth.

(followed by the paragraph presented in format (7) above)

- a The so-called Jungle of popular imagination
- b Homo Faber

(ER, p.88-90)

It is argued here that the above sixteen exercise formats fall into the following four basic exercise types:

Type (i): Formats (1) to (9) inclusive:

The learner is required to match a given synonym with a word (presumed to be unknown) appearing in a text.

Type (ii): Formats (10) and (11):

The learner is required to complete a blank space with a suitable word. This type is similar to type (i) in that the learner has to recognise a context and match the meaning of a word to it; but it is different in that it requires the learner to know already and be able to supply the missing word. So although the word supplied is not unknown, the exercise still claims to develop the skill of using context to discover meaning because it obliges the reader to focus on and appreciate the importance of context.

Type (iii) Format (12):

This type offers basic awareness training to the learner. Having examined a number of unfamiliar words, the learner discovers their meaning by using contextual clues; at the same time s/he discovers that it is possible to find out the meaning of words without having recourse to a dictionary.

Type (iv) Formats (13) to (16):

This type exposes the learner to various features of texts which may help him/her to discover the meaning of unknown words. It can thus be seen as another awareness training exercise.

It can be seen that most exercises used in the five coursebooks fall into the type (i) category. All five coursebooks use type (i) exercises; three use type (ii); one uses type (iii); and two use type (iv). It is clear, then, that the first two types predominate. These exercise types will come under critical scrutiny in the next section.

## EVALUATION OF THE EXERCISE TYPES

Two main criticisms are made here of the exercise types presented above. The first is that types (i) and (ii) in particular are unlikely to succeed in teaching the skill of using context to infer the meaning of words. The second is that the same two types risk presenting the learner with an unhelpful if not misleading view of word meaning.

The exercise types under scrutiny provide the learner with only limited help in learning the strategies which are required for the successful comprehension of unknown words. They may offer practice in skill use; but, with the possible exception of type (iv), they do not promote an awareness in the learner of the variety of means which should be at his/her disposal. Most of the formats in types (i), (ii) and (iv) focus the reader's attention on the meaning of certain words in a text which s/he has finished reading; but having read the text, the reader has presumably already assigned a meaning to any unknown words encountered. Thus they fail to offer help in understanding the text as it is being read. Types (i), (ii) and (iii) fail to draw the learner's attention to significant textual features, an awareness of which might lead to the learning of a useful reading strategy and a corresponding improvement in reading skills. These exercise types test what has been understood rather than teach the generalisable strategies which constitute the skill of using the context to discover meaning. If Twaddell's (op. cit.) view that this skill needs to be taught to second-language readers is correct, the exercise types described are unlikely to be sufficient.

One exception to the criticism that the exercises fail to offer help in understanding the text is a multiple-choice question in which the reader has to select the synonym



which best fits the meaning of a word in the text. However, this exercise, while aiding comprehension of a particular text, limits the choices available to the reader and thus denies him/her the freedom to discover meaning through a constructive consideration of the context. It thus risks hindering the reader's learning and use of the skill it aims to teach.

Types (iii) and (iv) seem to be attempts to raise the learner's awareness of the importance and nature of contextual clues in discovering meaning. For example, in type (iv) format (13), words in the same "chain of collocational cohesion" (Halliday and Hasan, 1976) as the unknown word are picked out of the text and juxtaposed so that the reader can guess the meaning of the unknown word. The expectation is that the reader will comprehend the general principle that "... lexical items that are in some way or other typically associated with one another ... tend to occur in similar environments ... ." (Halliday and Hasan, *op. cit.*, p.287) and use this knowledge in future reading. While this and other type (iv) formats may be serious attempts to teach strategies for discovering word meaning, they lose much of their value by appearing to the reader after the text has been read: the reader has presumably already made an attempt to understand the meaning of the new words.

The second major criticism to be made here is that the exercise types under review give the learner a partial view of lexical meaning. While there is "... a strong case for regarding stability of various kinds as an omnipresent feature of normal vocabulary use" (Cowie, 1988, p.136), there is also a case for taking account of the negotiable aspect of lexical meaning (Carter and McCarthy, 1988a). Words may have a residual, stable element of meaning, but another element is responsive to the context in which they appear. The common use of exercises in which words offered as synonyms have to be matched to other words in a text seems likely to encourage the learner to see words as replaceable, discrete entities. Scanning a text in order to find a word similar in meaning to a given synonym may not be very different from scanning a list of unconnected words with the same purpose. The word may be found if it was assigned a meaning resembling that of the synonym during the reading of the text; but if an appropriate meaning has already been inferred, there seems to be little potential in the exercise for learning or practising the skill of deducing meaning from context. Or the word may not be found, in which case the learner is likely to feel a sense of failure, despite perhaps having managed to understand the text and attribute meaning to any new words in it. In both cases the learner is encouraged to take a view of words in which the residual component of their meaning takes precedence over the negotiable.

To sum up, two major criticisms can be made of the exercise types presented earlier. The first casts doubt on the ability of the exercises to achieve their aim; the second suggests that they promote an incomplete, if not misleading, view of lexical meaning. The conclusion will briefly examine the implications of these criticisms.

## CONCLUSION

The above evaluation highlights the need for exercise types which teach rather than test the use of the strategies needed for readers to be successful in discovering the meaning of unknown words. It also emphasises the importance of the contribution of context to lexical meaning. The learner needs to develop an awareness of the ways in which this contribution is realised in texts. As yet, however, if the five reading coursebooks examined above are typical, there appear to be few exercise types in materials in current use which promote the required awareness.

This deficiency is surprising, as there are now several guidelines for the creation of exercises which offer a more systematic approach to the development of the skill. For example, Clarke and Nation (1980) provide in an appendix (p.219) a list of twelve conjunction relationships which can service as a useful guide to the kind of pragmatic knowledge which readers need in order to respond to contextual clues which may be present in a text. Grellet (op. cit.) provides a similar but shorter list in one of her "sensitizing" exercises (p.38). The two lists can be combined and used for the writing of teaching materials which show learners how this kind of knowledge can be used to discover meaning. The potential rewards for the learner of such an approach are an increase in vocabulary, a deeper understanding of how written discourse works, and, consequently, a greater reading competence.

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